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TO: President Hernandez, Vice President Aponte and
The New Jersey State Board of Education

FR: Christopher Emigholz
Director of Education & Workforce Development Policy
New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA)

DATE: September 17, 2008

RE: *Support and Recommendations on High School Reform Proposal*

Good morning, and thank you for allowing NJBIA the opportunity to comment on the proposed high school reforms. My name is Christopher Emigholz, the Director of Education & Workforce Development Policy for the New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA). On behalf of our 22,000 members, I wanted to offer some brief preliminary testimony as the State Board begins discussing high school reform over the next several months. NJBIA strongly supports the high school reform concept that has been outlined by New Jersey Department of Education, but does have some concerns about the reforms' impact on career and technical education that the Board should consider. NJBIA is committed to improving the quality of education to improve our future workforce, and we hope that you will consider our input so that the upcoming high school reforms can optimally do just that.

The NJ STEPS report lays out a compelling case for the need to increase rigor and standards in New Jersey's high schools, but I wanted to supplement that with some evidence from NJBIA's own research. NJPRO, the nonprofit research foundation of NJBIA, recently released a report on improving the State's business climate entitled "Economic Policies and Solutions", and it found that 81% of employers said that the availability of skilled employees was the most important issue - employers' top concern. Yet only half of all employers were satisfied with the job that the State was doing to address this concern. NJBIA's own Business Outlook Survey also revealed that the State was not doing enough to prepare the workforce with only one-third of employers satisfied with high school graduates' readiness for entry-level jobs and less than one-third satisfied with many of the core competencies required in the workplace. The bar must be raised in our high schools to improve the future workforce so that New Jersey can maintain its economic competitiveness.

And the time for excuses and delays has passed. High expectations of all learners are not easy, but they are a critical part of educational success and workforce development. New Jersey schools have the funding necessary to reach higher standards and will be able to overcome the obstacles that they will face in reaching them. The challenges of higher standards should not be a reason to lower the standards but to better strategize and plan for the standards.

NJBIA does see the need for some adjustments to the higher standards proposed. The goal of the reforms is a better workforce, yet there is a possibility that the new standards may undermine some of the more successful workforce development programs that currently exist in our schools. NJBIA's Business Outlook Survey revealed that employers were 50% more satisfied with the quality of high school students entering the workforce from county vocational-technical high schools than traditional public high schools, and a lot of that has to do with students being immersed in career and technical education (CTE) at the vocational-technical schools. It is important to ensure that the new reforms designed to improve the future workforce do not hurt the existing CTE programs that are already assisting the future workforce.

The aforementioned NJPRO "Economic Policies and Solutions" report interestingly highlighted that New Jersey employers were somewhat satisfied with the higher-level professional workforce of the State, but they had great difficulty in finding technically-skilled or blue-collar workers. The report recommended expanding New Jersey's vocational-technical schools and improving the State's technically skilled workforce. To protect the State's technical education programs, flexibility should be provided for students in licensed CTE programs. Perhaps a waiver can be given to students in these programs so that they can still demonstrate the rigor of their programs and extent of their knowledge, but do so in a less formal way that does not diminish any of the technical education they receive. Students that know what career they want to pursue immediately after high school should have flexibility to be able to best prepare for that so that they can successfully enter the workforce as soon as possible, but the vast majority of students who do not know what career or discipline they plan to pursue should more strictly comply with the higher standards proposed by the State. It is great that some students might know their place in the workforce early on, and we should not penalize them or delay them.

Again, NJBIA is a strong supporter of these reforms and believes they will improve the future workforce of the State. NJBIA just wants to make sure that they will improve the future workforce in all disciplines. NJBIA thanks you for considering our perspective, and we look forward to working with you in the future.